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ABSTRACT

More than 800 students at geographically isolated Southern Arkansas University, many of whom are commuters, would be considered nontraditional students. For the most part, these individuals study harder and produce work of higher quality than many students entering college directly from high school. Critical thinking skills are especially necessary for such students, and one useful assignment is the research paper in diverse mass media courses where analysis forces students to take real world media concepts and assess underlying factors or individuals shaping them. Students can also be required to subscribe to professional media publications, both as resource material and to provide a knowledge base from experts in the field. Field trips can also aid critical thinking foundations of nontraditional broadcasting majors. In public speaking classes, nontraditional students are initially afraid of how they will be perceived by their younger colleagues, but this fear usually disappears after the first class session. The result of various broadcasting and public speaking critical thinking strategies is an increased awareness on the part of nontraditional students to ask the question, "Why?" (NKA)

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"Critical Thinking Strategies for Nontraditional Students."
(Community College Section)

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Southern Arkansas University is a state-supported institution of 2,400 students. It is located in Magnolia, a town with a popul tion of 12,000. The institution is in the southwest portion of the state, geographically isolated from densely populated areas such as Little Rock and Shreveport, Louisiana. As a result, many students must commute to and from Southern Arkansas University for coursework. More than 800 students, many of whom are commuters, are listed as nontraditional.

Including service as a graduate teaching assistant, I have taught at the university level for 11 years. Along the way, I have had the opportunity to instruct a number of nontraditional students. For the most part, these individuals study harder and produce work of higher quality than many students entering college directly from high school. As a general rule, they regularly attend classes and turn in assignments on time. No empirical studies have been undertaken to conclude these findings, but rather my extensive personal observations as a professor.

Despite the generally good work produced by nontraditional students, some problems can get in the way of their overall view of mass media as applied to real world situations. I often find individuals willing to accept events taking place in the world without questioning motives and desires of newsmakers, corporations or those in positions of power. That does not presuppose such individuals or entities are inherently bad, but I want all students

to be willing to question anything. This is why critical thinking skills are so essential to the analytical growth of nontraditional students.

I am an assistant professor of mass communication and serve as director of the broadcasting sequence at Southern Arkansas University. The ability to think critically in order to analyze media events in an academic framework is a must for all majors. Nontraditional students, as mentioned previously, often do not possess the critical thinking ability which is needed for communication studies. They are not alone in this regard, as younger students often are willing to accept the status quo as both normal and acceptable.

How can I as a teacher and scholar impart relevant critical thinking skills to nontraditional students? These techniques are instructional devices which also flow down to traditional students. Interestingly enough, one of my teaching role models in this regard is law professor Charles W. Kingsfield, as portrayed by John Houseman in the motion picture and television series The Paper Chase. Kingsfield utilized the Socratic method to assist law students in teaching themselves. The constant self-probing analytical questions asked by Kingsfield, designed to elicit illuminating answers, proved successful in producing thoughtful law school graduates.

Of course, popular culture figures like Charles W. Kingsfield

can only serve as a guide for potential analyses in real world mass media situations. Nonetheless, the idea of making nontraditional students research and think for themselves has been an invaluable classroom tool. One of the assignments I have found useful is the research paper. A minimum of three term papers are assigned in the following courses: Introduction to Mass Media, Radio Production, Advanced Radio Production, Radio and Television Announcing, Television Production and Electronic News Gathering. The areas of analysis in these papers force students to take real world media concepts and assess underlying factors or individuals shaping them.

Since my teaching expertise is broadcasting, keeping current with new trends and emerging technologies is essential for the benefit of my students. Critical thinking strategies in new mass communication areas can also be attained by requiring students to subscribe to professional media publications. Introduction to Mass Media students subscribe to Time, Television Production students subscribe to Electronic Media and Radio Production students subscribe to Broadcasting. Reading articles give students, particularly those who are nontraditional, the most current critical bases of knowledge from experts in the field. These publications are also used as resource material for term papers.

Field trips are an aid to the critical thinking foundations of nontraditional broadcasting majors. In particular, personal contact with professional administrators and staff give

nontraditional students a chance to hone their analytical questioning skills. Older students can examine radio, television and cable trends more realistically from such interaction with organizational leaders and gatekeepers. The administrators become mentors, as nontraditional students can better track their career goals as a result of visiting with them.

In addition to teaching broadcasting courses, I also teach a section of the basic public speaking course each semester. It is a requirement for graduation, so many nontraditional students cross my path. One of the difficulties they foresee initially is how they will perceived by younger classmates. This fear usually dissipates after the first class session. Once this has been accomplished, critical thinking skills can be taught. Many nontraditional students are unaware of such applications in public speaking situations.

The ability of students to speak well comes in large measure from their being perceived by the audience as competent to speak on their topics. In graded assignments such as persuasive speeches or group discussions, critical analysis is necessary to have audience members either change their minds or reassess their views on subjects. Nontraditional students in particular are told to think about "Why?" they want the audience to believe as they do. Compelling evidence must also be gathered to show "Why?" an issue or problem can be solved through solutions they suggest. Enabling

nontraditional students to think and shape their ideas in this manner can assist their future analytical skills both inside and outside the classroom.

The result of these various broadcasting and public speaking critical thinking strategies is an increased awareness on the part of nontraditional students to ask the question, "Why?" I have been fortunate in having many of my nontraditional broadcasting graduates become successful in mass media positions. They tell me that critical thinking and analytical skills are important aspects of their jobs. There is no set formula in ensuring that nontraditional students become excellent critical thinkers. However, the examples related here can hopefully foster additional ideas from professors in order to enhance the collegiate experiences of nontraditional students.